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From Frank Miller to Zack Snyder, and Return: Contemporary Superhero Comics and Post-classical Hollywood

Federico Pagello

- 1 Contemporary Hollywood has proven, as Lyotard had clearly affirmed, that Post-modernism is not so much about the crisis of the narrative as about the crisis of the so-called grand narratives (Lyotard). The crisis of classical cinema, therefore, cannot be related to the emergence of a post-narrative film, but to the development of a different balance between narrative and spectacular sequences, as well as to the multiplication, fragmentation, and complication of storytelling techniques. Concepts such as “post-classical cinema” or “complex narratives”, for instance, have been recently proposed as definitions for the narrative structures adopted by many American films during the 1990s and 2000s (Elsaesser and Buckland; Buckland).
- 2 Film adaptations of popular comics arguably represent one of the best demonstrations of this assumption: far from abandoning the power of the narrative, they offer new forms of (digital) spectacle building on well-known heroes and sensationalist plots. Already in the first half of the twentieth century, in fact, comics had proved that popular fiction was able to develop narrative models alternative to that of classical Hollywood features, in particular by using sophisticated forms of serialisation. Moreover, from the 1980s onward American comic books have also elaborated a highly self-reflexive approach. This paper looks at the influences of comic-book narratives on contemporary Hollywood and investigates the diversified constellation of narrative structures to be found in comic book adaptations.
- 3 In the first part of this paper, the main features of superhero comics will be examined building on the works of Umberto Eco, Alberto Abruzzese, Henry Jenkins, Scott Bukatman, and Geoff Klock. In the second part, I will elaborate on the concept of “post-classical” cinema proposed by Elsaesser and Buckland in relation to *The Matrix* and *Unbreakable*: though they are not the adaptations of any comics, these two films testify to

the influence of superhero fiction on contemporary film narratives. Finally, I will look into a large group of cinematic adaptations of superhero texts (from Richard Donner and Richard Lester's Superman movies to Tim Burton and Joel Schumacher's Batman films, from Bryan Singer's X-Men and Sam Raimi's Spider-Man sagas to Zack Snyder's *Watchmen* and to Frank Miller's *The Spirit*), as well as into two non-superhero comics adaptations (Miller and Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City* and Snyder's *300*), arguing that they exhibit a whole series of variations around the classical and post-classical narrative structures of superhero stories.

Comic-book superheroes and the paradoxes of serialisation

- 4 As Umberto Eco first remarked, the essential feature of classical superhero comics is to be found in their serial structure. In his famous essay "The Myth of Superman", originally published in 1962, Eco points out a contradictory effort at the core of classical Superman stories. On the one hand, they aimed to reactivate the power of traditional mythical narratives, which consisted in the depiction of the sequence of unique, exemplary events characterising the life story of the supernatural hero. In Eco's account, this narrative model implied an irreversibility of the time: after living his adventures, the hero was supposed to grow old and die, *thus* becoming a myth. On the other hand, however, superhero stories, as industrially produced texts, were intended to give birth to a potentially endless narrative. As a consequence, the superhero *could not* die; his figure had to remain immutable and even protected from the possibility itself of death, in order to continue to exploit his appeal as long as possible (Eco). According to Eco's account, what is most striking in this peculiar type of serial fiction, is the fate of temporality. What superhero figures must necessarily elude is simply the passing of time, which would imply their death and thus the end of their adventures. As a consequence, superhero comics developed an unusual narrative technique based on the proliferation of "*imaginary tales*" (the so-called "what-if" stories) and "*untold stories*", which provide the readers with new perspectives on the lives of the characters without, however, threatening the stability of their fictional universe. Therefore, Eco defines the diegetic universes created by this accumulation of potentially conflicting narratives as a dream-like dimension. In fact, Golden Age comic books (from Superman's first appearance in 1938 to the early 1950s) incessantly reiterated the same short story structure—based on very simple plots in which the hero defeats the villain and saves the day—but they also juxtaposed them with bizarre parallel adventures presenting "impossible" circumstances (such as the marriage of Superman with Lois Lane) or secondary, more everyday-like situations (such as those referring to the adolescence of the superhero). The fundamental feature of superhero fiction is hence this relationship with a serial structure that involves the repetition of some essential elements but also allows the writers to be constantly trying out new narrative ideas. The result is a paradoxical coexistence of a classical narrative construction as far as one single episode is concerned, and, from a larger perspective, the proliferation of (often contradicting) fictional universes.
- 5 As Henry Jenkins has pointed out, during and after the Silver Age of comics (starting somewhere between 1956 and 1960 and ending in the early 1970s) superhero narratives began to evolve in an unprecedented manner (Jenkins, 2009). Thanks to the new series created by Marvel Comics, the self-contained, repetitive stories of classical superheroes

began to open up more ambitious sagas based on a narrative technique deeply influenced by the structure of television soap operas. In order to free the superhuman characters from their “frozen” lives, comic book writers began to develop intricate plots that go on for tens of episodes and eventually formed the complex narrative continuity that obsesses the hard-core fans of this genre. At the same time, however, this strategy did not decrease but actually exponentially amplified the contradictory proliferation of concurrent narrative universes. As the case of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (DC Comics, 1986) emblematically shows, post-Silver Age superhero comics gave birth to over-complicated universes involving dozens of parallel series in which competing versions of the same characters cohabited, to the point that a general clean sweep, and reorganisation, became necessary (even if it eventually proved unable to stop the process). This evolution of the iterative logic of the classical superhero stories demonstrates once more that this genre, which is based on a fundamentally serial structure, has shown a peculiar ability in mixing traditional and unorthodox narrative strategies.

Image and narrative: a fundamental ambivalence

- 6 Eco’s analysis of superhero comics has been in some respects questioned by scholars working on film and cultural studies, since its narratological approach seems to underestimate the crucial role of the image in this production. It is precisely for this reason that both Alberto Abruzzese and Scott Bukatman criticized the discussions of the superhero genre focusing exclusively on its narrative features. These two scholars stressed the primacy of phantasmagoria in superhero comics, pointing out the centrality of the “monstrous” bodies of their protagonists, the urban imagery as well as the visual aspects of the language of comics itself. Bukatman, for instance, dismissed the ideological analysis of superhero fiction by opposing its narrative level to its graphic *mise en scène*:

If ideas of preserving order are present at all, it is only at the level of narrative. The sequence of images, with their candy-colored costumes, dynamic and irregular layouts, movement beyond the boundary of the frame, fragmented temporalities, sound effects, and further abstractions, insist on a pervasive and appealing chaos [...]. The hyperbolic spectacle of the color comic page easily undermines and, yes, subverts, thin fantasies of social order (Bukatman 186).

- 7 The pioneering discussion of superhero fiction offered by Alberto Abruzzese in 1979, in a period in which ideological, semiological and psychoanalytical analyses of comics were dominant (see Berger and Dorfman), was even clearer. Abruzzese showed how in this genre the narrative and the spectacular elements were viewed through a hyperbolic distorting lens that set the genre apart from the narrative conventions of classical Hollywood cinema. Abruzzese stressed the tendency of superhero texts to exceed the narrative models based on nineteenth-century realistic literature. Drawing from Walter Benjamin’s conception of modernity, he examined the superhero genre in relation to the mystery/horror/sci-fi/fantasy genres (what is called the *fantastique* in French) that reflect the crucial role of phantasmagorical imagination in modern society. In mass/popular culture, in the modern city as well as in any other cultural production within capitalist society, we are faced with a proliferation of images that blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy and thus undermine the bases of realistic narrative models. In fact, as Bukatman proves in his analysis of the urban imagery and the role of masquerade in superhero comics, this production can be associated to other non-realistic, non-narrative, highly reflexive genres such as the musical (Bukatman).

- 8 The superhero genre is based on a balance between classical narrative models and increasingly complex serialisation strategies, as well as on a constant use of the power of spectacle. By paying attention to this fundamental duality, it is easy to recognize that the effectiveness (and extraordinary longevity) of superhero fiction in 20th and early 21st-century popular culture relies precisely on this flexibility and ambivalence. Superhero comics have developed non-classical narration, and largely exploited the role of the image as an alternative to more traditional, narrative-focused structures, but at the same time they never intended to abandon the attractiveness of engaging stories, since they are based on an unconditional acceptance of the rules of (epic-like) fiction. Contrary to the non-fictional genres that have become more and more common in the field of comics since the 1960s, the ultimate goal of mainstream superhero comics—as indeed of Hollywood cinema—consists precisely in keeping narrative (myth) alive in a medium and in a cultural context in which the power of spectacle and the image is indisputably hegemonic. It is no accident therefore that this duality should recall the dialectics between narration and spectacle that has obsessed the critical discussion of contemporary Hollywood movies (King), something which already suggests one of the principal reasons why superhero comics have become so appealing for contemporary film producers.

“Revisionist” superheroes

- 9 Before moving to examine the influence of superhero comics on current Hollywood cinema, it is necessary to look at what happened to the genre during the past three decades. As a growing body of scholarship testifies (Klock; Wandtke; Ndalians), the description of superhero narratives I have offered so far does not take into account the works of more recent and very influential authors from the 1980s onward. The celebrated and much discussed series and miniseries by Frank Miller (*Daredevil*, 1979-1983; *The Dark Knight Returns*, 1986) and Alan Moore (*Marvelman*, 1982-1989 – retitled *Miracleman* in 1985 –; *Watchmen*, with Dave Gibbons 1986-1987), as well as by other writers such as Grant Morrison, Warren Ellis, Garth Ennis, Mark Millar and so on, represented a new phase in the history of the superhero genre. The new approach adopted by these authors was labelled by fans, and later by scholars, as “revisionist” or “revisionary” (Klock) to stress that their main contribution was to question the whole meaning of the genre through the critical revelation of its ideological contradictions. What is most relevant here, however, is not so much this *questioning* of the traditional *topoi* of superhero fiction but rather the enhanced level of fictional and narrative complexity that one can observe in these texts. In fact, although they often intend to address and sometimes criticise the artificiality and ingenuity of classical superhero characters and stories, the principal aim of these writers is not so much to put an end to this genre or to design alternative ways of writing popular comics as to deconstruct their mechanics in order to show how they work and the way in which they could be differently rearticulated.
- 10 The concern of these authors, therefore, seems to be to further explore what can be done in narrative terms thanks to the inherent multiplicity that characterises superhero texts. It could also be to find new possibilities of using these characters as metaphors for the functioning of popular culture as well as vehicles for creating unprecedented narrative solutions. As a consequence, in these works we do not find any dismissal of the narrative and of course, of the fictional potential of superhero comics—quite the opposite. We are

faced here with a series of tests that demonstrate the ability of superhero fiction to resist any attempt to weaken its mythopoeic power. As Geoff Klock showed in his analyses of some of the most sophisticated post-*Watchmen* and post-*Crisis on Infinite Earths* series such as *Marvels*, *Kingdom Come*, *Promethea*, *The Authority*, *Planetary*, the effort of the superhero comics writers in creating more and more complex fictional universes has actually increased and led to new, innovative narrative solutions (Klock). Super-powered creatures are now more often the rule than the exception. Parallel dimensions have become a recurrent (even overused) theme while the convergence of fantasy and everyday life is certainly the most explored topic. As a matter of fact, Henry Jenkins proposes to describe the current situation of superhero fiction in this way:

Today, comics have entered a period where principles of multiplicity are felt at least as powerfully as those of continuity. Under this new system, readers may consume multiple versions of the same franchise, each with different conceptions of the character, different understandings of their relationships with the secondary figures, different moral perspectives, exploring different moments in their lives, and so forth (Jenkins 2007, 20).

- 11 This structural tendency of contemporary superhero fiction finds a perfect embodiment in the practice of “rebooting” that has become one of the dominant features of many recent film adaptations of the genre. From *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005) to *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb 2012), from *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008) to *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013), superhero films have started to go back to the origins of the comic book series, interrupting the narrative continuity established by the previous instalments in order to refresh their cinematic adaptations and thus to attract new audiences. As we will see in the next sections of this paper, this practice proved able to reactivate the narrative potential of apparently obsolete sagas and to relaunch their mythopoeic power. Golden and Silver Age superheroes, therefore, have seemed able to retain, and actually reinforce their appeal to filmgoers.

Comics Narrative and Contemporary Hollywood

- 12 Debates about the role of narrative in contemporary Hollywood cinema revolve around the question of whether the classical structures of the studio era (ca. 1920-1960) described by Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger (1985) are still dominant. Thompson (2003) and Bordwell (2006) themselves have replied at length to those who claim that current cinema has abandoned the traditional model in favour of a new conception of film as a purely visual spectacle, in which the narrative would be only a residual, supporting element that sustains the display of special effects and digital attractions. The two American scholars argue that, despite the increasing relevance of digital technology, a close reading of the most successful American films shows that the crucial features of classical narration are still at work. As already mentioned, Geoff King has also contested claims that oppose spectacle and narrative in contemporary cinema, showing that both are essential ingredients of most Hollywood blockbusters, whose distinctive formula would be precisely its mix of the two. The most convincing account of this controversial topic is offered by Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland, who not only stress the inadequacy of the binary opposition between spectacle and narrative, but also claim that it is necessary to recognise that some relevant differences between classical and contemporary cinema do really exist. However, they label the latter “post-classical cinema” to emphasize that these differences are especially connected to the viewer’s gaze:

We suggest that critics may define the post-classical as an “excessive classicism”, rather than as a rejection or absence of classicism, or as moments in a classical film when our own theory or methods appear in the film itself, looking us in the face. Any contemporary Hollywood film can be analysed (at least) twice, giving preference first to its conformity to the principles of classical aesthetics, and second to its conformity to post-classical aesthetics (such as mannerism) (Elsaesser and Buckland 18).

- 13 As for superhero comics, which present at once epic narratives and a potentially anti-narrative *mise en scene*, contemporary cinema plays therefore on the ambivalence, and the richness of its visual language and narrative imagination: it stimulates different readings and tries to catch the attention of different types of audience. At the same time, it can propose sophisticated reflections that reveal at once the difficulties of telling stories in the current cultural context and yet the need to keep the art of storytelling alive.
- 14 Therefore, before discussing the film adaptations of superhero comics, it can be interesting to look at how this genre has affected two highly influential Hollywood films produced in the late 1990s. Given the theoretical and historical backgrounds that I have quickly sketched, these two extremely self-reflexive works prove that superhero fiction has become a sort of ideal “test field” for thinking about the nature of film narrative in the larger context of post-modern culture.

The Matrix

- 15 *The Matrix* (Wachowski Bros., 1999-2003) is certainly above all a cyberpunk series, deeply connected with Japanese comics and Hong Kong movies, not to mention its several philosophical sources. In this vertiginous potpourri of various influences, however, that of the superhero genre, and of American 1980s and 1990s comics in general, is clearly visible. The superhuman figure of the main character, his superpowers, the urban atmosphere as well as many other thematic and visual features show that this series can be regarded as a quintessential example of comics-influenced film production. Furthermore, as far as the narrative structure is concerned, the screenplay openly addresses the specific features of the superhero genre that were discussed in the previous paragraphs.
- 16 In the first place, it is striking to observe that the narrative starting point of this saga coincides perfectly with Eco’s analysis of the Superman series. In fact, the “matrix” can be read as a literal visualisation of the dreamlike world in which characters such as Clark Kent were imprisoned according to Eco, and the rebirth of Thomas Anderson as the Messiah Neo can be seen as the Wachowskis’ rewriting of the Golden Age superhero’s double identity. As in the case of Superman, the superhuman figure of Neo comes in to balance the alienated life of the one-dimensional man embodied by both Kent and Anderson. Differently from Superman, however, Neo embodies the desire to free the subject from the routine of everyday life not by creating an additional phantasmagorical reality but rather by escaping the repetitive life within the matrix, i.e. by re-establishing a proper temporal chronology. His messianic figure, in fact, points towards a proper eschatological dimension. This approach is evident not only from a thematic point of view, but also from a structural one: the three episodes of the series form a single story, thus contradicting the endless serialisation of superhero narratives (in fact, the last chapter—*Matrix Revolutions*—was launched with the slogan: *Everything that has a beginning has an end*).

- 17 *The Matrix* reveals therefore a crucial tension between the “crisis of grand narratives” to be classical superhero comics and its new desire for epic. Neo’s mission is to give back to mankind a grand narrative of emancipation from technological slavery, which also openly alludes to the infinite repetitiveness of mass culture. The main goal of the series is thus exactly to address the lack of grand narratives in current society through the questioning of classical superhero fiction. As a consequence, *The Matrix* is also one of the climaxes of post-modern Hollywood cinema, in which ambivalence towards narration is most evident. The saga’s apparent linear structure is continuously questioned by its uneven narrative progression, based on incessant reversals of situations and their contradictory accounts given by different characters (especially those who can manipulate the narrative matrix, such as the Oracle, the Architect, the Merovingian). The endless “philosophical” debates among the latter precisely revolve around the nature of time and opposing views on the relationships between causes and effects. The recourse to the superhero genre in *The Matrix* thus helps to investigate the very necessity of narrative, which is at once affirmed and problematized.

Unbreakable

- 18 The influence of “revisionist” superhero works is explicit in M. Night Shyamalan’s *Unbreakable*. The film is indeed a meta-narrative on the evolution of the superhero genre in the post-modern context. The critical approach toward heroic figures adopted by authors such as Alan Moore is reflected in Shyamalan’s story of an apparently super-powered character who questions his own identity. Reworking the archetypal narrative of the “origin story” of the hero, one of the most beloved *topoi* of the genre, *Unbreakable* discusses its deepest philosophical meaning, dealing with the highly contested notion of subjectivity in contemporary culture. As in *The Matrix*, the ability of narratives to assign stable identities to individuals plays a crucial role in this context. The film tells the story of a comics fan (Samuel L. Jackson) trying to use superhero fiction as a tool to give himself a place in the world (as a “supervillain”), while at the same time forcing the main character (Bruce Willis) to believe that he is a superhero. In *Unbreakable*, it is therefore the insane belief of one of the characters in the comics’ narratives that brings the protagonist to question his own identity. Once again, therefore, the starting points the contradictory status of narrative. The position of the writer/director on this subject is inherently ambivalent: even though narratives are becoming more and more unstable, inevitably tied to unreliable narrators and opposing episteme, they continue to be the main tool through which human beings try to understand (for the best or the worst) what their role in life is.
- 19 How is this theme reflected in the movie from a structural standpoint? As in Shyamalan’s previous film, *The Sixth Sense* (1999), the reflexive approach is carried out through the systematic final reversal of the point of view, which in the last sequence of the movie pushes the viewer to reread the whole narrative from the perspective of the (only now perceived as the) “supervillain”. The “origin story” of the superman, discovering his powers and true identity as a hero, reveals itself as the construction of the evil character, or worse, as the necessary corollary to the mystifying narrative the latter makes up in order to justify his own existence *a posteriori*. The comics-inspired meta-narrative is thus only one of the elements of Shyamalan’s approach aiming at presenting a narrative discourse whose nature is continuously questioned by both the characters and the film

structure. As *The Matrix*, *Unbreakable* signals both the relevance of the comic-book imagination and the contradictory position of narration in post-modern fiction, confirming that the complex universes of superheroes are particularly apt to explore the role and function of grand narratives in the contemporary cinematic and cultural contexts.

Post-classical adaptations of superhero comics

- 20 Since both superhero comics and contemporary Hollywood cinema are focused on the reworking and reactivation of classical narrative structures in innovative ways, it is no surprise that film adaptations also do the same. In fact, what seems remarkable in this production is that, in spite of the superficial repetitiveness of the themes and *topoi*, it clearly proves able to replicate on a smaller scale the variety of the superhero genre. Even more interestingly, the order in which these adaptations were produced roughly follows the chronology of the original comics: first came the Golden Age characters (Superman and Batman), then those of the Silver Age (the Marvel heroes), and only later most “revisionist” series and other graphic novel-like texts—something which suggests that both film producers and film goers became gradually familiar with the increasing complexity of the genre.
- 21 From the point of view of the narrative structure, this implies that the first contemporary examples of superhero films (Donner and Lester’s Superman films, and Burton and Schumacher’s Batman films) adopted some traditional features of the 1940s and 1950s stories, such as the “what if” narrative or the “origin story”. The second wave of this trend (started with *X-Men* by Bryan Singer in 2000, and continued with the various franchises devoted to Spider-Man, Hulk, the Avengers, etc.) built on the more complex sagas created by Stan Lee and his collaborators at Marvel Comics from the 1960s onward. Finally, during the course of the first decade of the new century, adaptations of more recent miniseries and of graphic novels influenced by “revisionist” authors have become a common product: Nolan’s Dark Knight saga, Snyder’s *Watchmen*, Tim Bekmambetov’s *Wanted* (2008) or Matthew Vaughn’s *Kick-Ass* (2010) are all based on post-1980s comics (and, in particular, post-Miller and Moore’s work). It is therefore no coincidence that Frank Miller himself turned into a film director and shot an adaptation of Will Eisner’s *The Spirit*, after the extraordinary success of the cinematic versions of his two non-superhero creations *Sin City* and *300*, which will also be discussed here since they represent an interesting counterpoint.

Golden Age superheroes and (post) classical series

- 22 The first contemporary adaptations of superhero comics and the very first high budget ones in Hollywood history were the Superman and Batman movies produced between 1978 and 1997. Even though Tim Burton’s two films (*Batman*, 1989, and *Batman Returns*, 1992) were deeply influenced in their mood and visual style by coeval “revisionist” works such as Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One* (with David Mazzuchelli, 1987), Moore and Brian Bolland’s *The Killing Joke* (1988) and Grant Morrison and Dave McKean’s *Arkham Asylum* (1989) they will be regarded here as part of an early phase in which the narrative structure of the superhero movie revolves around the key features of Golden Age comic books.

- 23 The four Superman films (Richard Donner's *Superman*, 1978; Richard Lester's *Superman II* and *Superman III*, 1980 and 1983; Sidney J. Furie's *Superman IV*, 1987) form a classical series of unrelated episodes, in accordance with Eco's analysis. They even include one example of what can be easily seen as a disguised "what if" narrative. The second instalment, in fact, tells the love story of Clark Kent and Lois Lane, who eventually finds out the superhero's secret identity and urges him to renounce his superpowers in order to be free to live as a human; however, at the end of the film, Kent has to take his role as Superman back to save the planet, and chooses to erase from Lois's mind any trace of their affair. As a result, the events told in this episode are completely ignored in the subsequent films. Exactly as in the 1940s and 1950s comic books, therefore, this solution keeps intact the traditional formula of non consequent plots as well as the unchanging mythical status of Superman; at the same time, however, it forces the limits of this strategy and seeks to provide the viewers with more intriguing developments. In addition to that, the camp approach adopted by Lester in the third episode exaggerates the self-contained, a-temporal events that characterised Golden Age comic books to the point of assembling a series of gags that looks like the dialectical opposite of the magniloquent epic of Donner's first film.
- 24 Even if they were influenced by much more recent "revisionist" authors, the 1980s-1990s four Batman movies (the two directed by Burton and Joel Schumacher's *Batman Forever*, 1995, and *Batman and Robin*, 1997) fit properly in this revival of classical superhero narratives. In fact, at least from this perspective and especially as far as their serial structure is concerned, these films do not contradict the basic and simplest procedures of 1940s comic books. Although clearly advertised as parts of the same series, they present four totally unrelated stories that deeply modify the characters' appearance as well as the diegetic world from one episode to another, not to mention the repeated replacement of the actor playing Bruce Wayne/Batman (interpreted by Michael Keaton, Val Kilmer, and George Clooney). Tim Burton's two films are based on the cliché of the "origin story": even if Batman's own origins are narrated only through flashbacks, the births of his antagonists (the Joker, the Penguin, and Catwoman) are depicted in detail. Although all these characters are seen dying at the end of both movies, in the account of how they came to become the famous "supervillains" the viewer recognises the familiar *topos* of the superhero genre, which is normally aimed at introducing recurrent figures in the series—not to mention the fact that nothing is less definitive than death in superhero fiction.
- 25 Non-incidentally, the following instalments of the series showed that the producers of the films have the 1960s TV series in mind, more than the "revisionist" graphic novels. As happened with Lester's *Superman*, Schumacher's *Batman* reversed the history of superhero comics and went back to the campy approach of 1950s comic books and the famous television adaptation (or, better, parody) created by William Dozier between 1966 and 1968. From a narrative standpoint, this implies that the two films simply add new elements that will have no influence on the universe of the character—except for the inclusion of Robin, who, of course, had been expelled by Burton and whose reappearance constitutes therefore the re-establishment of a more classical *Batman* universe. As a matter of fact, in the whole 1990s *Batman* series the narrative seems to be less the accumulation of disparate components of an absorbing, and always expanding, fictional world than the organic presentation of a dramatic sequence of events. The exaggeration of the plots as well as of the visual design in the last two episodes reinforces this move

backwards, aiming at exploiting as much as possible the spectacular elements of the comics.

- 26 In conclusion, the two series are a clear demonstration of the precocious post-modernism of the comics medium, since they found in the Golden Age comic books what the most technologically advanced cinema of the 1980s and 1990s was looking for.

Endless sagas: from Marvel to “revisionist” series

- 27 The relation between superhero films and comics significantly changed when the Silver Age series were eventually adapted to the screen and the producers and authors of Hollywood looked at the “revisionist” works more seriously. This shift took place in particular during the first five years of the new millennium, which also further justifies my previous digression on *The Matrix* and *Unbreakable*: released between 1999 and 2000, these two films announced a new phase and together with 1990s TV series such as the heavily comic book-influenced *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Joss Whedon, 1997-2003), opened up new perspectives for the serialisation of the superhero movie. When Marvel Comics entered the cinematographic field for the first time in a resolute way the revivalist and campy tone of almost all previous DC Comics superhero adaptations were eventually dismissed. Of course, this also had immediate effects on the narrative strategies of these films.
- 28 With the X-Men franchise (Bryan Singer’s *X-Men*, 2000, and *X2*, 2003; Brett Ratner’s *X-Men: The Final Stand*, 2006; Gavin Hood’s *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, 2009; Matthew Vaughn’s *X-Men: First Class*, 2011, and their upcoming sequels), the Spider-Man saga (Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man*, 2002, *Spider-Man 2*, 2004, and *Spider-Man 3*, 2007; Marc Webb’s *The Amazing Spider-Man*, 2012, and its already planned sequels), the Avengers’ series (so far including Louis Leterriers’s *The Incredible Hulk*, 2008; Jon Favreau’s *Iron Man*, 2008, and *Iron Man 2*, 2010; Kenneth Branagh’s *Thor*, 2011; Joe Johnston’s *Captain America*, 2011; Joss Whedon’s *The Avengers*, 2012), as well as several other titles, a strategy of much more articulate serial narratives was established. Although these productions still deliver self-contained stories, they impose the concept of a long-running serialisation through the use of numerous (textual as well as para-textual) devices that make the viewer aware that the single film is only a portion of a larger fictional universe.
- 29 If Raimi’s Spider-Man trilogy represents an organic whole and the X-Men films tend to endlessly multiply the adventures of the character (especially through the extensive use of spin-offs and prequel), The Avengers franchise is possibly the most telling example of this evolution. The unprecedented and somewhat unexpected commercial success of the film directed by Joss Whedon (by large the highest grossing superhero film in history)¹ confirms both the potential of these new strategies and the fact that they will probably become more and more common in superhero adaptations. With the reboot of the Hulk series in 2008 and the adaptation of *Iron Man* (a rather obscure figure outside hardcore superhero fans at the time), Marvel Comics launched its own production company (Marvel Studios) and aimed at establishing a coherent fictional universe for its superhero films. In 2011, the adaptations of *Thor* and *Captain America* (two other characters who were pretty unknown to the audiences of mainstream cinema) were released with the precise goal of supporting the launch of the cross-over *The Avengers* the following year. The narrative structures of these five intertwined series thus present a much higher degree of serialisation than the Superman and Batman films of the previous decades, each

episode constantly alluding at once to the sequels of its own franchise and to a larger narrative.

- 30 Even without necessarily taking into account here the idea of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2007), which deals with a sort of “vertical” serialisation instead of a “horizontal” process (i.e. different media delivering a multi-strata narrative instead of a single medium proposing a serialised story), this new approach is unquestionably the result of the increased relevance of serialisation in the contemporary mediascape as a whole. In fact, it is crucial to consider the overall context in which the superhero film trend eventually reached its maturity. During this last decade, on the one hand, the convergence culture logic celebrated by Jenkins has become the dominant strategy: as Jenkins himself has repeatedly affirmed, comics were among the forerunners of these new dynamics, and their long-established tradition of serialised narratives has to be regarded as one their essential ingredients; on the other hand, in these years so-called high quality television imposed TV series as the most cutting edge audiovisual products (Akass), outclassing in the eyes of many critics cinema as the most significant (and symptomatic) example of popular culture. As some scholars have suggested in relation to recent television shows such as *The X-Files*, *Buffy*, *House M.D.* or *Fringe*, most recent superhero films seem to adopt a narrative structure that is a median position between a “serial” (telling a single story through several episodes) and a “series” (formed by unrelated instalments). This somehow unfinished but absorbing serialisation of comic book adaptations perfectly fits in the evolution of superhero fiction I previously discussed. As in the field of comics, moreover, this solution implies the proliferation of different temporal dimensions (for instance in the case of the prequel and “origin” film, multiple versions of the same characters (with the recurrent practice of rebooting a series because of economic or productive reasons) and other similar strategies.
- 31 Another key example of this strategy is the new adaptations of the Batman series. Directly influenced by contemporary rewritings of this archetypical Golden Age hero, the goal of Christopher Nolan’s Dark Knight trilogy (*Batman Begins*, 2005; *The Dark Knight*, 2008; *The Dark Knight Rises*, 2012) was twofold. On the one hand it aimed at (re)establishing a complex origin myth by explicitly referring to “revisionist” works—such as the already mentioned *Batman: Year One* and *Batman: Arkham Asylum* as well as Dennis O’Neil and Dick Giordano’s *The Man Who Falls* (1989) and Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale’s *Batman: The Long Halloween* (1996-1997)—and thus giving back some sort of linear temporality to the fictional universe of this character. On the other hand, it replaced the sequence of unrelated stories that formed the previous Batman series with a three-chapter epic. By using the trilogy format Nolan adopted the tactics of expanding and limiting the proliferation of multiple narratives in a single move, as it happens in TV with the crucial idea of “season”—which gives a cohesive unit to a collection of episodes that may or may not have an overall narrative—as well as with other recent superhero film series such as the X-Men and Spider-Man sagas—not to mention, of course, *The Matrix*.

Watchmen and the Spirit: Miller and Moore’s superheroes on screen

- 32 A further step in the approach of contemporary cinema to the narrative structures of coeval superhero comics can be found in two recent films through which the “revisionist” works made a new breakthrough on screen.

- 33 The first one is Zack Snyder's adaptation of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (2009). This film eventually succeeded in giving an appreciable rendition of the masterpiece it is based on, whereas the several previous adaptations of Moore's graphic novels (*From Hell*, *V for Vendetta*, *The League of the Extraordinary Gentlemen*) were almost inevitably scorned by critics because of their inability to retain at least some of the qualities of their sources. In fact, although Snyder condensed and presented in a more linear way the intricate plot of the comic and was unable to reproduce within the film form the extraordinary use of the language of comics by Moore and Gibbons, he worked out to offer the most faithful adaptation of a comic text so far, and thus delivered the first accomplished example of a "revisionist" superhero film.²
- 34 As far as the narrative is concerned, this means that *Watchmen* has little in common with most of the films I have looked at here. First of all, it presents the story of a large number of characters, not focusing on any of them in particular. By doing this, it challenges the crucial process of identification that represents one of the most efficient ways for the superhero genre to gain the readers' or viewers' adherence and affective participation. Secondly, it gives a specific space to each character, in particular through the constant use of flashbacks that dramatically interrupts the action-driven structure of conventional superhero fiction. While staying loyal to (and actually increasing) the proliferating narratives that characterise this genre, the multiplication of the temporal dimensions calls into question the plain annihilation of time in a dreamlike dimension: the events and the lives of the protagonists are presented as deeply affected by the passage of time, which implies that both history and aging play a crucial role in this work. Thirdly, instead of telling the usual story of superhero(es) avoiding the catastrophe planned by "the supervillain", *Watchmen* focuses on the failure of the heroes and thus completely undermines the fundamental structure of the whole genre. This is not simply a thematic issue or something concerning the lack of a conventional happy ending of every other superhero fiction—which, however, is actually *necessary* for structural (i.e. serial) reasons—but rather a subversive move that focuses the viewer's attention on what is generally excluded or absolutely secondary in this genre. For these and other reasons, Snyder's movie proves that the now traditional (post) classical narrative + excessive spectacular action scenes formula is not the only possible one.
- 35 The second innovative feature film that will be briefly discussed here is Frank Miller's *The Spirit* (2008).³ This movie is a loose adaptation of Will Eisner's classical 1940s superhero series directed by one the most important "revisionist" authors. The fact that a comics artist, and not a secondary one, turns into a director, is of course already meaningful in itself. However, it is especially Miller's particular approach to filmmaking that proves to be interesting. Despite the consensual dismissal of the film by most critics, *The Spirit* is arguably one the most sophisticated comic book films ever made. In fact, Miller's work does not try to hide its comics origin within a traditional film style, as most superhero films. It also avoids the simple mimicking of the language of comics to be found in Rodriguez' *Sin City* and Snyder' *300*. In this film, Miller succeeds in delivering a highly hybrid text, which is neither pure live action nor animation. Moreover, even if *The Spirit* presents a weak narrative that makes it a sort of urban elegy instead of the usual superhero epic, it also perfectly renders the ambivalence of the genre, that is to say its contradictory status between the desire for myth and the awareness of its impossibility. Therefore, if the plot of the movie is nothing but the skeleton of the basic superhero story (the-good-guy-defeating-the-villain-who-wants-to-control-the-world-plot), its *mise en*

scene is arguably one of the most elaborate and sincere tributes to the language and imagination of comics to be found in cinema. What the critics misinterpreted as parodic or campy allusions to the imagery of comics was actually the typical humour of both Eisner's original series and Miller's own more light-hearted comics; what they completely failed to see, moreover, was the overall melancholic tone of the film, which is not superficial nostalgia or irony but a real understanding of the anachronistic quality of superhero fiction. The weak narrative structure of the film is thus at once a commentary of the superhero genre and, somehow, its only possible honest form of existence today.

Beyond superheroes: Miller's *Sin City* and 300

- 36 A brief detour from the main corpus analysed in this article will be useful at this point, serving as a final countercheck of what has been said so far about the superhero genre. The two films discussed here are in any case inextricably tied to the evolution of the latter and perfectly fit in the account of American comics history I have rapidly sketched. The graphic novels they are based on, the *Sin City* series (Dark Horse, 1991-2000) and 300 (Dark Horse, 1998), were indeed the two principal non-superhero comics created by Frank Miller during the 1990s, and the only comic works he released as a writer-artist in this period. Having been one of the most influential authors of superhero comics during the 1980s, this is of course extremely meaningful. As far as the construction of the narrative is concerned, it is sufficient to remark that in these creations Miller abandoned not only the superhero genre but also its typical serial structure. Instead of the never-ending stories of immortal creatures, Miller looked for alternative forms of serialisation as well as non-serial narrative models, like the intermingled noir "tragedies" he depicted in the series of graphic novels that form *Sin City*, or the emphatically mythological representation of heroism in his over the top epic 300. Taking us back to our starting point—Eco's claim that superhero fiction is based on the contradiction between the irreversible temporality of classical mythological narratives and the dreamlike atmosphere of twentieth-century serial fiction—Miller's increasing focus on death and sacrifice could not but take place at the same time as his departure from the superhero genre. According to Eco, in fact, what Superman Golden Age stories aimed to elude was exactly the issue of death, and especially its (negative) consequences on the possibility of endlessly exploiting the same characters. Therefore, from the apparently nihilist yet still heroic figures of *Sin City* to the programmatic death wish of the Spartan martyrs, Miller overtly rejects the most important assumption of the superhero genre, looking for alternatives to the exhilaration and euphoria implied by the multiplicity of its classical and contemporary serial narratives.
- 37 As a consequence, Miller and Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City* (2005) shows several relevant differences from the films discussed so far. From a narrative standpoint, the key element is obviously the juxtapositions of three almost unrelated episodes, two of which end with the death of their protagonist. Even if in the comics—and the upcoming film sequel—some of these characters will return in other stories, also interacting among each other—the goal is here less that of creating a universe potentially expandable *ad libitum* than that of depicting a complex fictional world, in which the interrelated lives of a certain number of characters can be explored in depth, more for the taste of the single author/demiurge than as a pure editorial strategy of endless serialisation. The fragmentation of the narrative, therefore, is at once a clear effect of Miller's familiarity with the formulas of

superhero fiction and a consequence of his desire to do something new. The unprecedented visual technique displayed by the film, of course, adds to this result, breaking with the naturalism of Hollywood conventional cinema. Quintessential cartoonish neo-noir, *Sin City* confirms many of the previous considerations on the peculiar ability of post-classical cinema to include all possible variations around traditional genres.

- 38 Zack Snyder's *300* (2007), in its turn, was an even more dramatic deviation from the typical narrative strategies of superhero fiction. Of course, this digital epic blockbuster about 300 soldiers sacrificing themselves for the freedom of Greece superficially has much in common with the basic features of other superhuman adventures; however, it is precisely on the structural impossibility to transform them into serial heroes—at least in the peculiar sense in which superhero comics have used serialisation—that one should focus. As it happened with the already mentioned *The Dark Knight Returns*, in his debut-solo film *The Spirit* and in both *Sin City*'s graphic novels and movie, Miller's interest in the story of the battle of the Thermopylae lied in the possibility of giving back the heroes of comics a true mythological quality (this is also why, of course, both the graphic novel and the film show no interest for any historical accuracy whatsoever). By choosing an event whose crucial aspect is that all the heroes are known to die, Miller was in the first place looking for something that was clashing not only with the thematic value of the necessary happy ending of superhero stories but, more radically, with its formal structure. From both a narrative and visual perspective *300* is arguably the peak of Miller's mannerism: the plot, while charged with mythical resonances, is reduced to its minimal elements and serves as the simple outline for the quest for the most spectacular visual power. For this reason as well in Snyder's controversial adaptation much effort was put on the re-creation of the visual features of the graphic novel and on the extreme exploitation of the possibilities offered by digital effects. Even if the director chose to add some events that were absent from the original text to give a more articulate narrative to the film, it is evident that its core is in its visual style and in the very long action sequences. The panel-to-panel adaptation strategy that informs most of the shots, the extensive use of slow motion and post-production "pictorial" effects reinforce this anti-naturalist approach. Unlike most of superhero films, which try to maintain a certain balance between narrative and spectacle, here the equilibrium is constantly broken.

Conclusions

- 39 The essential multiplicity that governs contemporary superhero comics, as well as their cinematic versions, implies that as far as this genre is concerned we cannot understand the relationship between these two media if we focus only on one single adaptation. As we have said, this is because the basic principle of superhero narratives lies in their serialisation. As a new episode of a long-running series, i.e. nothing more than the *latest* one, superhero adaptations can adopt at once traditional narrative structures and a post-classical style of *mise en scène*, in order to attract filmgoers that may or may not be interested in the continuity and the overall fictional universe the specific film refers to. Only if we pay attention to the complex connections between the single movie and its background can we really grasp how it works in a different way from conventional book-to-film adaptations, i.e. by building on the fundamental ambivalence of superhero fiction, its juxtaposition of more or less classical heroic tales (with their repetition of "unique"

events) and phantasmagorical, post-modern spectacle (with its endless variations of the same motifs). This was especially true for the first adaptations of Golden Age/DC Comics superheroes during the 1980s and 1990s.

- 40 In the second place, the inherent narrative multiplicity of this genre implies that all these movies contribute (each in a specific way) to the never-ending increasing complexity of superhero universes and their increasing reflexivity. With the adaptations produced since 2000—with the proliferation of movies based on Silver Age/Marvel Comics characters as well as those based on “revisionist” series and graphic novels—we are confronted with the potential birth of a proper cinematographic superhero genre. Raimi’s Spider-Man and Nolan’s Batman films, the *X-Men* and the *Avengers* “super-franchises” cannot be analysed but as the elements of a single (yet serial) macro-text. The variations that each of these films proposes in relation to the disputable canon of the original comics or previous adaptations are entirely part of their narrative—as well as of their commercial strategies. When Marvel Comics decides to reboot the Spider-Man saga after the colossal success of Raimi’s trilogy it perfectly knows that this could have been a risky move; however, it can rely on the positive experience of the Marvel Ultimate series in which the character has undergone a similar reworking from its comics version as well as on its now well-established reputation in the film market. The other series mentioned are also built on the recently acquired popularity of their heroes: before the release of their first film adaptations from 2000 onwards, the characters featuring in the *X-Men* and the *Avengers* series were indeed almost unknown to the general public, especially outside the US. Therefore, it is only thanks to the establishment of these film franchises that the creation of a whole cinematic version of their universe has become possible.
- 41 As a countercheck of all that has been said, those films that detach themselves the most from conventional superhero fiction—like *Watchmen* and the films based on the works by Frank Miller or directed by him—prove that the encounter of these two media can give birth to more innovative narrative procedures. However, these films, as well as other openly “revisionist” titles such as *Wanted* and *Kick-Ass*, can be regarded as meta-narratives reflecting on the clichés of the superhero fiction, so that it would have been probably unthinkable to adapt them if some sort of film version of the superhero genre had not been previously established. In fact, these films rely on a rewriting or subversion of the conventions of the genre that confirms the ability of both superhero fiction and post-classical cinema to develop sophisticated serial narratives, allowing almost infinite variations around their core features.
- 42 Thanks to its flexibility and richness, superhero fiction constitutes not only the most convenient and profitable source for Hollywood adaptations, but also one of the best models for audiovisual narrative strategies in general. Far from being purely contingent and based simply on the development of digital technologies, its success reveals crucial traits of contemporary cinema. At least as far as mainstream films are concerned, it is very likely that their influence will remain strong for many years to come.

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NOTES

1. See <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/search/?q=avengers>
2. I have analysed some of the visual features of the adaptation in relation to their equivalent in the graphic novel in another paper, titled "Space as History: Watchmen and Urban Imagery in Superhero Comics," published in *Cinema & Cie*, vol. X, no. 14-15, Spring-Fall 2011.
3. I have proposed a more in-depth analysis of this film in a paper titled "True to *The Spirit*?: Film, Comics, and the Problem of Adaptation," available at the following address: http://host.uniroma3.it/riviste/Ol3Media/archivio_files/Ol3Media%2010%20Comics.pdf.

ABSTRACTS

Film adaptations of superhero comic books offer a particularly rich case study to analyse narrative strategies of contemporary Hollywood cinema. The serial structures adopted by the comics they are based on, as well as their use of the spectacular potential of the image, provide a successful model for current audiovisual productions. Without completely abandoning classical techniques, these adaptations try to find a new balance between narrative and digital phantasmagoria. This paper discusses some significant examples of this genre, including adaptations of classical DC and Marvel franchises and more recent series, as well as other comic-book influenced films such as *The Matrix* and *Unbreakable*.

Les adaptations cinématographiques des magazines de bandes dessinées (*comic-books*) du genre superhéroïque constituent un terrain privilégié pour examiner les stratégies narratives du cinéma hollywoodien contemporain. Les structures sérielles adoptées par les *bandes dessinées* qui l'inspirent, aussi bien que leur utilisation du potentiel spectaculaire de l'image, fournissent un modèle de succès pour les productions audiovisuelles actuelles. Sans renoncer totalement à des techniques classiques, ces adaptations essaient de trouver un nouvel équilibre entre narration et fantasmagorie numérique. Cet essai analyse des exemples significatifs de ce genre, y compris des adaptations de franchises classiques de DC et Marvel et de séries plus récentes, ainsi que d'autres films influencés par les *comic-books* comme *The Matrix* et *Unbreakable*.

INDEX

personnages Tim Burton, Richard Donner, Stan Lee, Richard Lester, Frank Miller, Alan Moore, Christopher Nolan, Sam Raimi, Joel Schumacher, M. Night Shyamalan, Zack Snyder, Andy Wachowski, Larry Wachowski

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